

Baucus focuses on health care needs during subcommittee hearing

Federal and state health officials made the commitment during a Senate subcommittee hearing on June 20 to work together to develop a long-term health plan for Libby within the next month.

U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, who chaired the subcommittee hearing of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, secured the commitment from Dr. Henry Falk, assistant administrator of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry and Dr. William Spence, medical officer for the state of Montana.

Spence said he was putting together a request to submit to ATSDR.

"How much will this cost?" Baucus asked.

"A lot of money," Spence replied. "I can't give you a dollar amount today."

Spence said his proposal will include a cost. He said the screening program could be recommended until at least the year 2030. He also discussed the need for a screening helpline using an 800 number which would provide information for people not only in Montana but throughout the United States.

The health screening program should be ongoing and not seasonal as was the program conducted during the past two years.

“Many fear Grace’s recent decision to no longer help with medical expenses of folks who had qualified for their own medical plan, has the potential to bankrupt our own state Medicaid program.”

John Konzen
County commissioner

sonal as was the program conducted during the past two years.

"You should probably give some thought to where the dollars are going to come from," Baucus told the two doctors. "You should probably be creative."

Baucus said he needs to work closely with the Montana congressional delegation — Sen. Conrad Burns and Rep. Denny Rehberg — to help secure Libby's needs.

Dr. Brad Black, Lincoln County Health Officer and medical director of the Center for Asbestos-Related Disease in Libby, said the proposal sounded good.

"We've always asked when's

it going to happen," Black said. "We have the demand there and it sounds like it's moving in the right direction."

The CARD Clinic receives 4 to 6 requests a week for screening, said Pat Cohan, RN, of the CARD Clinic.

ATSDR is working with the state of Montana to support "localized planning" to address future medical needs, Falk said.

"Extended medical testing will need to continue in some form for many years," he said. "People who have tested positive will need to be followed to note any progression in the

course of the disease. People who have tested negative to date, but who were substantively exposed, will also need periodic testing, but probably on a different schedule."

Falk continued, "Primary responsibility for the medical testing program will be transitioned to the state and local health department with ongoing technical and resource support from ATSDR."

He summarized the following goals for the coming year:

- Implement the registry of former workers and family contacts;
- Establish the medical testing program on a long-term basis;
- Conduct epidemiologic studies to formally investigate the links between the various environmental exposures and the development of disease;
- Provide data on potential health effects in other states that had vermiculite processing centers that led to harmful exposures; and
- Pilot mesothelioma surveillance activities in coordination with the National Institute

for Occupational Safety and Health.

In addition to the health care concern, witnesses expressed concerns about the cost of providing that service to victims.

"When Grace stepped away from their responsibility, they allowed the miners and the wives and children of those men, to do all the heavy lifting, and to take on the risks Grace was unwilling to shoulder," said Lincoln County Commissioner John Konzen. "And as Grace continues to step away from even the small portion of responsibility they willingly accepted to help our community cover prescription drug, home health care and other medical costs, they are breaking us. Our tiny community's medical resources are already stretched too thin."

Other county officials, across Montana, are beginning to express concerns about the far-reaching impact of Grace's lack of responsibility, Konzen said.

Many fear Grace's recent decision to no longer help with medical expenses of folks who had qualified for their own med-

ical plan, has the potential to bankrupt our own state Medicaid program," he said.

Konzen's concerns were echoed by Black.

"I want to express my concern pertaining to how we will be able to meet the asbestos-related health care needs we are sure to face over the next 20-30 years," Black testified. "W. R. Grace has been providing funding for the CARD clinic and an insurance program. However, their commitment to caring for affected individuals is waning and suggests that their support is short-lived. The need for research and developing therapies is high priority."

Other witnesses were U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., Dr. Gregory Wagner, director of the Division of Respiratory Disease Studies, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Marianné Horinko, assistant administrator of the EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response.

The committee also received a written statement from Rep. Denny Rehberg.